

## **COMPARISON BETWEEN FASCIST ITALY and NAZI GERMANY**

The reasons for the rise of Fascism in both Germany and Italy had three common denominators:-

1. Frustrated nationalism
2. Fear of the spectre of communism
3. Distrust/disillusionment with democracy

### **1. Frustrated nationalism**

In Italy:

Italy had entered WWI in return for promises of land but she only received S.Tyrol at Versailles (much resentment as poverty-stricken Italy had made great material sacrifices i.e. 600,000 dead, which she could ill-afford).

In Germany:

Treaty of Versailles was universally resented ('Diktat') Germany lost 7 million people and 12% of her territory. National self-determination was denied to Germans in w. Prussia., (Sudetenland, A-Lorraine, Danzig and Austria) Widespread belief in Germany that the army had never been defeated in battle but had been 'stabbed in the back' in 1918 by cowards and pacifists at home.

Fascist solution -Fascism was fanatically nationalist and aims at the establishment of national glory through Empire building and glorifying the use of naked force and strength.

Hitler's Nazi party (established in 1920 and initially made up of right-wing ex-soldiers) aimed to get rid of 'the gang of November criminals' (i.e. the Government), tear up Versailles and establish a German Reich through 'Lebensraum'.

Mussolini's Fascist Party (established in 1919 and made up of black-shirted ex-servicemen and youths enjoying violence) aimed to build a new Roman Empire in the Mediterranean (including land in Africa and influence in the Balkans). The cries of both movements found considerable resonance amongst humiliated populations seething with nationalist discontent.

### **2. Fear of Communism**

Fear of Communism as a factor in the rise of Fascism in Italy and Nazism in Germany

**In Italy** by 1919 two million men were unemployed owing to demobilisation and a closing down of war industries. Added to this were food shortages and inflation, which increased discontent amongst the working population. In these conditions of social dislocation the strength of the Communist Party grew resulting in Soviet-style factory

take-overs and seizures of land by landless peasants. These factors led to a fear of a communist revolution in Italy amongst the Upper and Middle classes. The fascists were quick to exploit the situation. Posing as defenders of property, and receiving financial backing from Fiat, Pirelli and the Banking Association fascists broke up strikes and turned peasants out from land they had confiscated. However, the fascists (like the Nazis) were a socially heterogeneous group made up of those who felt that the Left nor the traditional conservative Right offered them protection. Mussolini (like Hitler) was a brilliant propagandist and opportunist who was able to exploit public fears of disorder and revolution as well as the general disillusion with parliamentary democracy. Mussolini's violent overthrow of the Communists was applauded by industrialists, landowners, the Church and the Middle classes who feared for their status and property under Communism. Nevertheless, the connivance of the authorities played a major role in bringing M to power e.g..

- (I) The police make no attempt to halt the March
- (II) King Victor Emmanuel III appointed M head of government (he had no confidence that the army would oppose M).

**In Germany** the ushering in of the Weimar Republic resulted in a wave of political extremism not least of which was the attempt by the Communist Party (Spartakists) to seize power in Berlin in January 1919. The KPD's stance against private property and belief in revolutionary violence outraged German bourgeoisie sensibilities. Although they were brutally crushed by the Right wing Freikorps (who also suppressed the Bavarian Communist regime) there remained a latent fear of a future left wing coup, particularly as the KPD retained a paramilitary group, the Red Veterans League. However it was not until the Great Depression hit Germany in the early Thirties that the KPD reasserted itself (along with other parties antipathetic to democracy). With 6 million unemployed the Communists added 23 to their 54 Reichstag deputies in 1930 and by July 1932 they achieved 14% of the popular vote. However, the Communists were not a mass party (like the Nazis) and they had almost no chance of being asked to participate in a government by the virulently anti-Communist President Hindenburg. At this juncture, Hitler who was a brilliant speaker, propagandist and opportunist, was able to exploit public fears of disorder and revolution as well as general disillusion with parliamentary democracy. The Nazi SA instigated massive violence on the streets against the KPD as Hitler whipped up the spectre of a red revolution. But the KPD had no intention of grabbing power at this time. Thalmann (the KPP leader) hoped that if Hitler were to achieve power then he would be overthrown by a proletarian revolution. Arguably the main reason for the appointment of Hitler as Chancellor in Jan 1933 was, as Bullock has stated "not of any irresistible revolutionary or national movement sweeping him into power, nor even of a victory at the polls, but as part of a shoddy political deal with the "Old Gang". Hitler did not seize power; he was jobbed into office by a backstairs intrigue. The heaviest responsibility of all rests on the German Right. The German Right despised the Republic and democracy. A good example of Hitler's opportunism and the Right's willing compliance came during the election campaign of 1933 when the Reichstag was burned down, allegedly by a Communist. The Nazis claimed that this was a beacon for a KPD uprising and in the circumstances panicked Hindenburg into passing a decree outlawing the Communist party and declaring a state of national emergency. President Hindenburg granted enormous powers to the police (dominated by Nazis), which effectively outlawed the Communist party, and the atmosphere of national hysteria ensured that the Nazis

could bully the new Reichstag. At the opening of the Reichstag in March, Hitler was able to pass the Enabling Law effectively giving himself dictatorial powers. The Nazis only polled 43% of the votes, which, with their Nationalist party allies gave them a bare majority. Only 93 Social Democrats voted against the bill.

Fascist Solution -(to combat Communist divisiveness -class war -and attacks on private property) was to advocate national (or racial) unity of all classes and to defend private property. (Fascism would harness capitalism to serve the interests of the Fascist State)

### **3. Distrust of Democracy**

Democracy in both countries had very shallow roots historically and was often identified with incompetency, national disunity and disgrace (e.g. Versailles) and an inability to deal with disorder.

#### in Italy.

By 1920 democracy was synonymous with incompetency, bribery and corruption (universal male suffrage had only been introduced in 1912 therefore there was no real vested interest in the democratic process). Governments (by shifting coalitions) employed Fascist Squads to smash Communism in the cities and by 1922 Mussolini was, in effect, controlling vast areas of Italy (public faith in the system of Government had collapsed). In the same year Mussolini staged his 'March on Rome' whereupon the King awarded him the premiership with certain powers to rule Italy for one year (as Mussolini had no Parliamentary majority). After this Mussolini consolidated Fascist rule (for Mussolini democracy was 'a putrid goddess').

#### in Germany

The Weimar Government had been born at the time of Germany's defeat in 1918 and, as it had signed Versailles on Germany's behalf, it had become associated with Germany's dishonour. Further, it was battered by both the left (the Spartakists in 1919) and the right (the Freikorps in 1920) which showed how very narrow its base of support was. The middle classes suffered financial ruin under its leadership as a result of hyper inflation in 1923 while the ultra- democratic constitution and proportional representation was to prove its undoing as so many small parties sat in the Reichstag -none of them strong enough to form a majority government (it was the alliance between the Nationalists and the Nazis in 1932 which enabled Hitler to become Chancellor). Weimar's inability to deal with the enormous economic problems of the depression in Germany between 1929 and 1932 (6.5 million unemployed) plus the hostility of influential sections of German society -the army leadership, nationalist politicians and big business led to its downfall.

Fascist Solution -Fascism despises democracy (seen as divisive) and advocates instead authoritarian leadership by

- 1) an elite group (the SA or Squadristi)
- 2) or/and a strong leader ( the Fuhrer or Duce) extolling the virtues of obedience (not discussion) strength and racial purity (not tolerance).

### Other similarities

- Fascism's rise could have also been in part the result of a reaction **to economic crises** (which led to social and political crises) which beset Italy in the early 20's and Germany after 1929. In the atmosphere of insecurity people appeared to be willing to sacrifice what they might have seen as dubious freedoms in return for order and strong leadership.
- In a broader, sociological sense, fascism was the product of mass-democracy too hastily implanted upon nations undergoing the strains of industrialization, urbanization) colonial expansion, and total war. Fascist movements took over many democratic forms and procedures) while vilifying democracy itself. Elections were held, even if farcical) parliaments existed, even if packed, plebiscites were staged, even if bogus.
- Since mass appeal was necessary to attain power and to motivate the populace to action) both Fascism and Nazism concentrated on the organization of parades) mass meetings) and displays of para-military force. Uniforms, flags, printed material and every other propaganda device. were employed on a lavish scale by such organizing geniuses as Goebbels and Starace. Book-burning) Jew-baiting, and exhortations to 'think with the blood' or 'Believe, obey fight'. turned nineteenth century liberal rationalism upside down and substituted the irrational emotions of the mass for the logical calculations of the individual
- Fascism and Nazism were essentially eclectic. Many of their techniques were taken from the Bolsheviks they professed to detest. As systems of belief and action both lacked cohesiveness. The ramblings of *Mein Kampf* had to be refined or returned to a purpose by the administrative capacity of a Speer or an Eichmann. Mussolini had to define and elaborate his ideology *after* he had become a head of state.
- Both he, and his disciple, Hitler, had risen from humble origins; both had attained the rank of NCO in the war; both presented themselves as a common soldier and a representative 'man of the people'. Neither was averse to taking over policies or principles which could serve his purpose; both therefore borrowed freely from socialism. Mussolini had at least been a leading socialist. Hitler had merely been impressed by the discipline of trade union processions in pre war Vienna, though the original *Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* did contain some socialists. Both movements included socialistic objectives in their programmes.
- The corporate state was held up as an enlightened device to overcome the disputes between capital and labour. The 25 points of the Nazi programme of 1923 attacked high finance, and identified it largely with the Jews, and paradoxically, with international communism. Both dictators demanded, and achieved, state control of the economy and put through vast programmes of re-armament and public works, partly to stimulate employment but mainly to increase the power at their disposal. For similar reasons both attempted to pursue a policy of **autarky**.

- Both movements succeeded in gaining power by more or less constitutional means, though amid an atmosphere of violence and uncertainty. Both movements, having attained power, effected a revolution from above, crushing every form of opposition by the use of secret police and party militias and gradually infusing the police and the army with party men.
- The party itself, having succeeded as an instrument for the seizure of power, was, after suitable purges, maintained as the instrument of the new tyranny. Punishments, privileges, and indoctrination thereafter ensured the efficient performance of its tasks. In both Germany and Italy it vastly increased in size and spawned a complex structure of departments to accommodate the complete takeover of all aspects of individual and group existence.
- Churches, unions, and youth associations were alike transformed and every agency for moulding public attitudes—schools, press, radio, cinema, sport—was placed under party control. Bureaucratic efficiency and ideological fanaticism thus enabled the Fuehrer and il Duce to attain a degree of power over nations of tens of millions that was unprecedented in history.